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THE KING'S MESSENGER

by John R. Alderson

Cold winter winds skittered along the cobblestones, puffing up dry snow and dead leaves into frigid little tornadoes that spent their feeble energy against the adamant walls of the castle. They swirled the messenger's cloak, and bit at his ankles through the soft palace slippers he wore.

There had been no time to find boots. Nor could he have gainsaid his sorcerer King's words with the petty need to secure proper footwear. Such an affront would have cost him his head. Or worse. Not that the errand he had been set made him feel any more certain that an axe would not soon be stroking his neck with its sharp kiss. His breath hissed through icy teeth at the thought. From whence the blow came – the King or the rebel leader he had been sent to fetch – mattered not. His head would just as surely be rolling in the gutter, caring not at all who had struck it from his shoulders. Aroused by these somber thoughts, something deep within him stirred, but he quelled it with fear aided strength.

"My Lord, my King!" He wailed aloud. "Think you so little of me?" His cry was whipped away, shredded by the wind so quickly he almost believed he had said nothing at all.

Shuddering, he cursed his own folly. This was a task for a soldier, not a powdered, be-wigged courtier. Now, betrayed by his sycophant's tongue, he stood outside the palace walls, feet numb, facing a death as sure as any he might have embraced in a search for his boots.

Resignation bowed his narrow shoulders. He pulled his rich woolen cloak tighter and scurried away from the palace gates across the wide cobbled plaza. Before the buildings of the city blocked his view he paused to look longingly back at the palace. The white crenelated walls and parapets, guarding the spires and halls beyond, shone with a rosy hue under a thin morning sun. From behind the merlons the keen points of the soldier's halberds glinted, mocking him who had foresworn their protection. Impaled upon pikes above the gates, were the heads of three men, but the messenger could not look at the grisly sight for long. He was too sure that his own head would soon be decorating a similar pike. He gulped, coughed, and rubbed his neck to ease the sudden tightness in his throat.

Turning his back on the palace he passed with speed through the city's narrow, empty streets, his shoulders hunched against the silent, brooding shops and houses that leaned up and over, shutting off the sky. Barred windows and doors frowned down upon the intruder who trod their dingy lanes. Fetid smells, of garbage and rancid humanity, eddied on dirty gusts held captive by the press of buildings, assailed his sensitive nostrils. An occasional dog, rooting in the garbage, was the only other life he encountered along

those dim avenues.

The messenger's lips curled in distaste. Choking back a rising gorge, he placed a perfumed handkerchief beneath his nose and hurried on, offended by both the odors and, if truth be told, by a King that would subject so loyal a servant to such abuse.

After a time, his feet frozen almost beyond feeling, he came to the end of the city's cobbled ways. Winter-dry beggarweed now crunched beneath his slippers as he approached the rebel encampment. He marveled at the catapults and other engines of war, and at the vast array of tents that blanketed the plains as far as the eye could see, completely girding the city. Until this moment, he had not doubted the impregnability of the palace, nor the power of his King.

For a brief moment he contemplated flight, but discarded the idea almost before he had it. Where would he run? Even if he wished to flee, there was nothing outside the palace for him. To live out the rest of his days as a crofter or traveling minstrel . . . far better to die, than that. Still, this resolve was far from comforting. He had as little wish to die as he had to live in poverty.

From beneath his cloak the messenger produced the truce flag he had been given. With reluctant steps he approached the enemy camp. There he was taken by four rough peasants who, with callous disregard for the white flag, prodded him with the butt ends of their short pikes as they escorted him to the tent of their leader.

They assaulted him with many coarse jokes about his finery and delicate nature. One of them, more rude than the others, stripped away his cloak and tiptoed about, to the raucous laughter of all. The messenger was soon shivering from the icy wind needling through his remaining clothes, stinging his flesh. He was near frozen by the time a high captain arrived and returned his cloak to him.

Shortly thereafter he stood in the tent of the rebel leader who sat at a rough table, studying one of the many maps that were piled upon it. The captain stood a step to the rear, his sword at the ready. Though it was warm inside, the messenger shook uncontrollably, only slowly regaining the feeling in his limbs.

"I am Sterwe Ackar," said the rebel leader, his voice a brusque, rapid staccato that clipped off the ends of his words. Looking up from his maps he went on, "It is my lot to general this uncouth rout you now find yourself among. If you have met with less than gentle treatment on your journey here, I apologize. This is a peasant army I command, and I'm afraid no amount of training can raise them above their peasantry. The Gods know I've tried."

Sterwe Ackar arched one eyebrow in sardonic amusement and, despite the gentle apology of his words, gazed at

him with eyes as cold as any death the messenger had envisioned for himself. Though he was much too politic to betray his feelings openly, he could not deny a growing fear of this man. Sterwe Ackar was a man of slight build who wore his suit of mismatched armor and faded silks with an air of unmistakable authority. And from this authority there radiated a power the messenger felt to his bones. Could this General sense what was hidden within? Biting back his fear, the messenger forced his lips into their most obsequious smile.

"Noble General Ackar," he began, his tone sopping with flattery, "The King has commanded me, his most humble servant, to ask that you attend him at his court. Under a guarantee of safe conduct, the King bids you and any of your commanders you deem necessary, to come before him and make your demands. They will be heard. The King knows you for a great warrior, General Ackar, but he feels there is also great honor in the reaching of a diplomatic understanding. Further, as a surety of his good faith he offers seven of his finest knights as hostage." The messenger bowed low, though his eyes never left Sterwe Ackar.

"At last!" blurted the captain, in high elation, "Sterwe, we've won! By the Gods, we've won!"

"Silence! We have won nothing except another deception. Are you so soon forgetting the last embassy we sent? If you are, then perhaps you need to observe their heads that are, even now, stuck upon pikes above the palace gates."

"That was a mistake, most worthy General," said the messenger, straightening up from his bow. His heart fluttered. He had come to one of the most dangerous points of his mission.

"Curb your foppish manners," growled Ackar as he leaned, knuckles down, upon the table, "And explain to me . . . this mistake." The rebel's voice was heavy with sarcasm.

"Milord. Your embassy met their unfortunate end without the knowledge of the King. When he became aware of it, he was wroth. The heads of those responsible for the crime have taken their places atop those self same pikes. Your men are to be returned to you, along with the King's heart felt sorrow."

"His sorrow! His sorrow is not enough, heart felt or otherwise."

The messenger's voice squeaked when he said, "By order of the King if this be not enough recompense then you are commanded to take my head as further payment." His body twitched when a voice that was not his own hissed the word 'Yes' in his mind. Fright chilled him. Silently he prayed. Oh, my King! Mercy! Do not, please, do not. His knees became weak when he saw Sterwe Ackar studying him in intense curiosity. The messenger closed his eyes briefly, tears squeezing from their corners. For a minute nobody spoke.

"Oh, wily sorcerer!" laughed Sterwe Ackar at last, striding about in high animation. "Do you not see what

we are up against, Captain? Even one that commands powerful magics, like yon King, needs more than his arts to combat as numerous a foe as we. Yet he has the temerity to issue orders in my camp. I should take this fool's head just for that.

"When surrounded by a pack of wolves a man does well if he throws them a bone with some meat on it. And he has, indeed, tossed a meaty bone. Seven knights as hostage. The heads of our ambassadors replaced by the heads of their slayers, and this useless piece of court fluff to appease our revenge. Blood for blood. And when we have made our demands, what then? The unclean tyrant will still sit the throne and we but little better off than when we started. Pah! Well, this wolf pack is not so easily distracted. Whether he offered a hundred heads or a thousand, it would not matter. We came to pull his dirty carcass from the throne and that we shall do."

The captain nodded, a zealous fire in his eyes. The messenger trembled, though not this time from the cold. He felt his life slipping through his fingers like sand and railed at the injustice.

"General Ackar," said the messenger, wheedling, "Though I was ordered to offer my head, I have no desire to lose it. I am no warrior. The price of war should not be exacted from me. I am, as you say, court fluff, not a worthy prize for one as mighty as you."

"Yet one I may take pleasure in collecting unless you can give me a reason why I should not."

"There is much about the palace I could tell you, if it would further your ends. And mine."

"Are you then traitor as well as coward?"

"I am a traitor only to misuse. Much like you, Milord. I am the victim of a cruel trick, one well known to the King ere he ordered this mission."

"I see," was all General Ackar said to this. Turning his attention to the captain he asked, "Is all in readiness?"

"Aye, General."

"Give the order then. And take this fellow -- find him a horse and a sword and return straight away." Sterwe Ackar paused and bent his eye once more to the messenger. "We will see how badly you want revenge."

The messenger sat his horse poorly, clutching a rusty, pitted sword in an unsure hand. Next to him was General Ackar, along with several of his captains. Arrayed behind them and surrounding the palace was the vast rebel army. From the bastion topping the palace gates, just below the three heads, the King looked down at them. The messenger held his sword up, shieldlike, between himself and the King.

It was a silent scene, unmoving, save for hot breath clouding chill air and the limp halfhearted flutter of pennants. One of Ackar's captains, that the messenger did not know, leaned over and whispered in his General's ear. Ackar listened, nodded, then returned his attention to the King.

Without taking his eyes from his enemy, he said, "Those are the three that slew my ambassadors?"

"Yes, Milord."

"You knew them?"

"No, though I have seen them at court."

"What is your name, messenger?"

The messenger flinched at the unexpected question. "My name hardly matters, General Ackar."

"Nonetheless, I would know it. No man should die nameless, if it be his fate to die."

"My name is Keldor Lis, Milord."

"Very well, Keldor Lis. I have a tale to tell. No, no, do not be impatient. It is not a long tale. My good captain here had the misfortune, not so long ago, to spend a short time in the King's dungeons. As is the way of prisoners, he made quick friendships. Two of those friends now look down upon us from the ends of those pikes. Now, it is passing strange to me that these two, who were so lately imprisoned, should rise so quickly to a station high enough to have ordered the beheading of my men. All without the King's knowledge. Do you not also find this odd, Keldor Lis?"

Keldor's mouth went dry, his mind awl with the certain knowledge of what was to come. And the fear of it overwhelmed him.

"You have betrayed me, my King! I who have ever been faithful!" he shouted. Anger welled, boiling his blood. A feeble arm shook his useless blade in pathetic defiance.

Keldor Lis stiffened then in confusion and growing horror. He twitched in his saddle as though in a fit and cried out in pain and terror. From a place deep within a black madness grew. And it was evil beyond reckoning. With lightening speed it took possession of his body and he was powerless to stop it. The spirit of Keldor Lis uttered a piteous, mewling sob, soon cut off. What had once been Keldor Lis stared up at the King with blank eyes.

"I have served you well, Master?" it cried out in a terrible voice.

"Yes, my pet," said the King, "You have served me well."

A sword swung. Forward and back. The creature that was once Keldor Lis was able to partially block the blow, though it still cut deep into his neck. Blood gouted, splashing down upon his horse. Maddened, the creature bolted, crashed into the palace wall and fell in a heap, pinning his rider to the cobblestones.

Sterwe Ackar, a bloody sword in his hand, leaped from his horse and ran to the side of the fallen messenger. Keldor Lis, for a short time himself again, looked up at his slayer. He knew that he had received a mortal wound, but he held the General blameless.

"You knew, didn't you?" he gasped, the gash in his neck making speech difficult.

"Aye, Keldor. Your King is not the only sorcerer in this war. My power is, even now, holding back the demon, though I cannot hold it for long. Not like this at least."

"He placed the Dread within me, but he promised . . . " Keldor Lis coughed feebly, beginning to choke on his own blood, ". . . you know what you must do now?"

Sterwe Ackar nodded. Keldor Lis sighed and closed his eyes. The General's sword swung down once more, cleanly severing the head this time. Then, lengthwise into the headless carcass he drove his blade and left it. The Dread, imprisoned now in Keldor's body, would soon die. Sterwe Ackar stood, looked to where the King had been standing, but he was gone.

"Another death to add to your long account, foul Tyrant," whispered Sterwe Ackar. "May the Gods grant you peace, Keldor Lis."

Returning to his horse, he mounted and signaled the attack and the doom of the King.